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ABSTRACT

Advertisements can be used in many ways to facilitate the teaching of a commercial language. If reproduced as slides or other visual aids, they serve as a visual warm-up exercise for each class period, either reinforcing previously discussed topics or introducing new ones. Catchy headlines in commercials promote rapid expansion of vocabulary and are often excellent examples of difficult grammatical structures, convincing students of the usefulness of such structures. Idioms and cultural idiosyncracies are easily illustrated with advertising. Advertisements can be given a broader function when organized according to themes and general topics, such as banking, insurance, transportation, and categories of consumer goods. A variety of classroom activities can be derived from advertisements: fine print can be used for translation exercises, testing of reading skills, or discussion; students can guess concealed headlines or fill in words, phrases, or text segments from overhead projections; and students can compare American and foreign advertising or provide comparable wording in the target language for American advertisements. (MSE)

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TEACHING COMMERCIAL GERMAN THROUGH ADVERTISEMENTS

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TEACHING COMMERCIAL GERMAN THROUGH ADVERTISEMENTS

The teaching of a commercial language to American students is still a novelty in most undergraduate language departments. In many cases, it has become a dreaded sideline for professors who feel more at home with the teaching of literature or the traditional basic language courses. Unfamiliarity with the higher echelons of management and economics, lack of a good selection of textbooks, the ephemeral nature of news and consequent need for replacing much of the carefully prepared material each semester, all contribute to my colleagues' reluctance to tackle such a course.

After teaching commercial German for three semesters to students with different degrees of language training, I have found that advertisements are a most stimulating and helpful addition to my selection of course materials. Commercials and advertisements are untapped resourses rich in instructional potential. They do not become obsolete as quickly as does news or even textbooks. They are readily available and cheap to acquire, und certainly no advertiser is going to object if they are copied. Advertisements constitute a relatively small body of text and they can be great fun to teach, since students are already familiar with their general use and application. They also touch upon a wide variety of products and services, thus offering many topics for discussion.

Advertisements can be used in a great variety of ways to facilitate the teaching of a commercial language. If reproduced on slides, they serve as a visual warm-up exercise at the beginning of each class period, either reinforcing previously discussed topics or introducing new ones. The catchy headlines in commercials promote rapid expansion of vocabulary through repeated occurrence in different advertisements. Surprisingly, advertisements are also excellent examples

of difficult grammatical structures because a sales-pitch is, by nature, often very economical and pithy in its wording and demands basic structural know-how. With the help of advertisements, students can be convinced that it is, indeed, important to master difficult grammatical structures, such as the dative and genitive cases, the passive voice and subjunctive mood, and that many advertisements will be inaccessible to them without mastery of idioms.

Apart from their importance in developing basic commercial language skills, ads have a much wider function if they are organized according to themes and general topics, such as banking, insurance, transportation, and various categories of consumer goods from food and drink to clothing and furniture, to name only a few. Here again, slides will be helpful as a welcome visual respite from textbooks. However, working with advertisements should not be limited to the showing of slides. Ads can be collected in designated folders and used as textbook supplements. The fine print in commercials, which is not easily legible on slides, can be utilized in group work for translation exercises, testing reading skills, or as discussion material. If ads are used in overhead demonstrations, students can be asked to guess the concealed headline, fill in deleted words or phrases, or invent an appropriate new text.

In addition, students might be shown an American commercial for which they have to find a compatible wording in the target language. This exercise, however, is likely to open a Pandora's box of problems. Advertisements, like humor, are often interwoven with cultural idiosyncracies; they frequently make use of proverbs, refer to tradition, local customs and regional characteristics, all of which require some cultural background. When students see how similar products and services are advertised in the target country as compared to the USA, they begin to realize the importance of understanding cultural differences in a much

more immediate way than is possible in a traditional language class.

Among the many different ways in which advertisements can be used as instructional material, I suggest four basic approaches for a commercial language class. First, the quick expansion of vocabulary by explaining uncommon or difficult words in ads; second, the analysis of difficult grammatical structure; third, the explanation of idioms and cultural idiosyncracies in foreign commercials; fourth, the use of comparative advertising as a means to explain different approaches to selling similar products in different countries.

VOCABULARY EXPANSION

In German, compound nouns are much more frequent than in English. People not familiar with the German predilection for compounding adjectives, verbs or nouns are often astonished at the sheer length of some German words, and students sometimes become discouraged by having to learn such "heavy" vocabulary. Since commercials especially tend toward the use of long, impressive sounding words, the study of advertisement slogans and the breaking down of compounds into their constituent parts will help most students overcome their inhibition against vocabulary learning. Let's begin with some Lufthansa advertisements which appear in the monthly edition of Scala, a magazine published in several languages and therefore available in most departments. The Lufthansa ads will remind students that the English compound "airport" has its German counterpart "Flughafen", that the word "airline" translates relatively easily into "Fluggesellschaft", as does the word "airfleet" into "Luftflotte". The next step would be to point out German compounds that no longer translate into English compounds such as "Anschlussflüge" (connecting flights), "Wartungsstandard" or "Wartungsprogramm" (maintenance standard, maintenance program), or "Leistungsfähigkeit" which translates into more than ten English terms in a standard German/English dictionary. Rather than having students

guess at the most suitable English word, the dissection of the German compound into the noun "Leistung" (performance, achievement) and the adjective "fähig" (able) will lead them to a more accurate understanding of a given context. If students are reminded that a number of German suffixes serve to change adjectives into substantives, i.e., "fähig" (able) into "Fähigkeit" (ability), they will also more quickly memorize such frequent expressions as "Schnelligkeit" (quickness, speed), "Pünktlichkeit" (punctuality) or "Gründlichkeit" (thoroughness). Several of the Lufthansa advertisements can be understood after such initial exercises, even though students might not be able to recognize every single word. Take, for example, the following slogan: "Flughafen Frankfurt - Inbegriff für Schnelligkeit, Leistungsfähigkeit, Flexibilität und sofortige Anschlussflüge. Hier, wo wir zu Hause sind, starten und landen täglich bis zu 800 Maschinen." The only noun not easily recognizable is, perhaps, "Inbegriff" (embodiment, epitome), a circumstance which could be turned into an interesting guessing game, since some students might already be familiar with "Begriff" (concept).

With the help of slides and overheads, vocabulary acquisition skills can be rapidly improved by shifting to more difficult advertising texts in business, science, and technology. The drawing of a modern, sophisticated telephone system whose cord and receiver form the profile and contour of a man's head may help suggest the meaning of "speicherprogrammiertes Mitdenktelefon" (a telephone that thinks with you, or for you, by virtue of its programmed storage). A helicopter called "Senkrechtstarter" (vertical take-off aircraft) impresses its name more plausibly on the viewer's mind when it is seen carrying a telephone booth from one place to another. Since students in business language classes invariably ask for methods to help them store the unfamiliar commercial vocabulary which suddenly confronts them, I found the repeated showing of slides with commercial slogans a most successful warm-up exercise. Compound words like "Einmalhandtücher (hand-

towels to be used only once, throw-away towels), "Dauerläufer" (jogger, but also something that runs continuously), Fernsteueranlage" (remote control system), "Inlandsinvestitutionen" (domestic investment), impress themselves more permanently on a learner's memory when they are literally seen in context. Business vocabulary abounds in compound expression (stock -exchange, -broker, -price, -tax, etc.). Learning new words becomes less tedious once the individual components of compounds are understood and can be recognized in different word combinations.

GRAMMAR AND STRUCTURE

Adjective endings are the bane of the German language. Students often understand the purpose of adjective endings better when they see German ads which constantly use nominal adjectives. If an advertiser wants to describe the various qualities of a product, English language structure mostly demands that a noun follow the adjective(s). In German, adjective endings on nominal adjectives predict the noun they modify and make the naming of that noun superfluous. Thus, the introduction of a new, prominently depicted, type of wine is simply headlined "Der Neue" (the new one); the latest computer ad states "Der Richtige" (the right one); the German equivalent of gin claims to be "Ein guter Deutscher" (a good German [gin] ; the word play is lost in the translation). Furthermore, a German commercial for frozen peas reads: "Nehmen Sie was Gutes. Nehmen Sie die Süssen, Zarten, Grünen von iglo". In English, the nominal adjective is possible only in the first line: "Buy something good. Buy the sweet, tender, green peas from iglo." Besides demonstrating the frequency of nominal adjectives, the pea ad is also one of many examples of formal imperatives often used in advertisements. When a car manufacturer shows a new model claiming to have discovered "the art of combining the useful with the pleasurable", students realize that even very short and catchy slogans are subject to internal structural rules.

For example, the German car ad that reads: "Die Kunst, das Nützliche mit dem Angenehmen zu verbinden" contains a main and dependent phrase, a nominal adjective in the nominative case and a nominal adjective in the dative case because the latter is preceded by a dative preposition; the dependent phrase is actually a relative clause requiring (in this case) an infinitive structure with the infinitive verb in the end field.

The constant use of reflexives in commercials emphasizes their broad application in German, and the more difficult combination of reflexives with verbs like "lassen" is more palatable in commercials than in textbook exercises. The sales pitch for a stereo: "Eine Stereoanlage, die sich sehen lassen kann. Zu einem Preis, der sich hören lassen kann." (A stereo system than can afford to be seen. At a price that can afford to be heard) may even bring a smile where a textbook sentence would only evoke a frown. Rather than analyzing each grammatical point in every advertisement phrase, I found it more effective to focus on one particular grammatical example. Often, students will discover and remark on additional structural features; they may wish to verify the fact that the stereo ad contains two relative pronouns and the modal verb "können".

The repeated showing of slides and overheads is particularly helpful in reviewing the passive and the subjunctive. Announcements in public signs, for instance, are often stated in the passive. The German phrase: "Es wird gebeten ..." (the public is asked), followed by various requests (to not smoke, to return things to a container, to throw garbage into a bin, etc.,) has replaced the formerly popular imperative. Many of the public signs display internationally recognized pictures, and a tow truck towing a passenger car will be understood as a warning when the sign also bears the inscription "Widerrechtlich abgestellte Fahrzeuge werden kostenpflichtig abgeschleppt" (unlawfully parked cars

are towed away at the owner's expense). Many hotels and restaurants have a sign on the entrance reading: "Dieses Haus wird vom ADAC empfohlen" (this house is recommended by the German Automobil Club); students will want to remember this for future travels. I have made several overheads from a calendar issued by a German electric company, which proved to be especially effective and entertaining when dealing with subjunctive structures. Each calendar sheet starts with the heading: "Was wäre, wenn der Strom nicht wäre?" (How would it be without electricity?) and shows a cartoon depicting people coping without electricity. Computers are replaced by slide rules or wooden balls used in first grade arithmetic class; meat is fried over candles standing on top of cold stoves; carrier pigeons nesting in a phone booth relay messages; women peddle bike wheels connected to washing machines, and there are many more. Students enjoy these overheads, and the possibilities of discussing unreal situations in the various subjunctive forms by using vocabulary related to commerce and technology, are endless.

IDIOMS AND CULTURE

Using slides, pictures, and overheads is exceptionally helpful when the cultural aspect of a foreign commercial language needs to be explained. Many idiomatic and proverbial expressions find their way into commercials as do indigenous humor and various local customs. One may begin with the easy task of letting students identify some of the numerous anglicisms (really americanisms) that frequently appear in ads. They might be related to American products and services, or may have been adapted for lack of a more suitable German expression, or may simply be used as attractive catch words. Black & Decker's popular'dustbuster' is advertised as "Saugboy" (saugen: to vacuum, but also:

to suck); a plant nursery promises success through "Flower Power", and American Express advertises its credit card as: "The Businessman's Passport: Besonders für Oft-Flieger" (especially for people who fly often), assuming that people who fly often also speak enough English to understand their ad. At this point, the instructor may want to discuss why such commercial snobbery would not fare well in the U.S.A. if a foreign firm tried a similar trick on American customers. On the other hand, it should become obvious why many modern expressions, especially from computer and space technology, have been adapted from American English.In other examples, the German word "Dienst" is frequently replaced with the more gentle sounding English "service", as can be seen in the ad of a leading German newspaper that announces its "service" to vacationing customers.

Vernacular idioms, which often are difficult to translate, pose more problems for students. The English translation of the figurative expression "Es geht um die Wurst" (the moment of truth has come) does not correspond in any way to the delicious sausage pictured in the ad. The German expression itself makes no literal sense unless a person is familiar with the old custom of boys climbing maypoles in order to win the sausage hanging from the top. Thus, a phrase based on a local custom (literally: they go for the sausage) has found its way as idiom into German, especially into competitive language. Another commercial borrows Goethe's famous portrait to sell mineral water: "Fachinger. Das Lieblingswasser der Anspruchsvollen und Gesundheitsbewussten" (Fachingen water. The favorite water of discriminating and health-conscious people). Reference to the letter (mentioned in the ad), in which Goethe praises the water's positive effect, invites a discussion of Germany's continuing love affair with its spas, mineral springs, and natural foods. Moving into the mo-

dern world of computers, another ad depicts a little first grader holding a cone-shaped container which traditionally is filled with cookies and chocolates to sweeten the transition from play to school. Instead of sweets, however, a home computer sticks out of the bag, and the precocious little boy blinks approvingly. Most students understand the meaning of the ad and the one-word headline "Bildungsreserve" (educational reserve) only after the implications have been explained and the compound itself, especially the intricate German concept of "Bildung", has been analyzed. An ad showing a compact car, presented as: "Ein Auto,bei dem nichts zu kurz kommt" (a car in which nothing comes off short, i.e., badly,) might perplex an American reader, as would the advice by a bank to take one's sheep to dry grounds before interests fall. ("Bringen Sie Ihr Schäfchen ins Trockene, bevor die Zinsen weiter fallen", meaning to secure your assets before interests drop further). In both cases, the idiom itself is the punchline of the commercial.

Advertisements with cultural and traditional connotations are numerous and lend themselves to various uses. The countless "Jägermeister" ads, appearing in many German magazines, can be mentioned here only in passing. They typically induce a discussion about the German tradition of forestry and (herb)-liquor production. In general, the ads are very popular with students because they offer a great variety of humorous, subtle and clever slogans.[1]

[1]"Ich trinke Jägermeister, weil unsere Schuhfabrik in Absatzschwierigkeiten steckt", or, "Ich trinke Jägermeister, weil ich Wirtschaftssachverständiger bin", or "Ich trinke Jägermeister, weil ich in der Ente meines Freundes eine Gans gesehen habe". These slogans are almost impossible to translate because the wordplay is invariably lost. In the first case, a man drinks this particular liquor because his shoe manufacturing company has difficulty selling shoes.(Absatz: sales, but also: heel). The second man is disturbed by the latest economic developments; he drinks the stuff because he is a specialist in economics. The third ad pokes fun at the German predilection for labelling people or things with the names of animals. A very small French car, wobbling along the street is fondly called "duck", but a silly young girl is often derogatorily referred to as "goose". Thus, an unhappy woman exclaims that she drinks "Jägermeister", because she saw a goose in her boyfriend's duck.

COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING

Working with comparative advertising is a favorite in commercial language classes and closely related to recognizing cultural idiosyncracies. Students are amused to learn how American commercials are effectively used in the target country. They will not only remember the foreign slogan but also question any possible shift of emphasis or meaning. The once popular American Alka-Seltzer commercial promised relief from an upset stomach caused by overeating, or eating the wrong food ("I can't believe I ate the whole thing"); in German ads, Alka-Seltzer helps to give people a clear head: "Machen Sie Ihren Kopf schnell klar" (clear your head quickly), or: "Ein klarer Kopf hat einen guten Tag" (a clear head has a good day). The cause of a "fogged head" is not mentioned but the implication is obvious. The cigarette ad which graced Times Square for many years: "I'd walk a mile for a camel" has a slightly different twist in German when it reads: "Der Weg lohnt sich" (the walk is worthwhile). American texwood jeans find their way into poetry when two jeans wearers exclaim: "Ohh - wie sind wir froh, texwood sitzt am Po!"(Ohh - we are so glad texwood fits well on the fanny) with drawings of happy faces on the relevant place. Firestone tires exploit the catchy ring of German alliteration: "Füchse fahren Firestone Phönix" (foxes drive Firestone Phoenix).Coca Cola's famous ad: "It's better with Coke" translates almost literally: "Besser geht's mit Cocacola", but students will note that the pithy German Coke ad contains a common idiom.

Comparative advertising lends itself particularly well to exercises for students working in small groups. After sufficient exposure to and discussion of commercials, students should be assigned to do their own translation of ads. To translate from English into the target language is more difficult and ultimately more beneficial, but this exercise works either way. For the beginning

it is advisable to let the groups work out English translations of foreign ads and compare results. It is interesting, for example, to see the result of a group translation into English of the following commercial by a German jam manufacturer: "An den Früchten sollt ihr sie erkennen" (you shall know them by their fruits). The unmistakable borrowing is, of course, from the Bible (Matt.. 7:16,20). The previously mentioned Lufthansa advertisements also serve well for this type of exercise, especially since many of the German ads have their counterparts in the foreign editions, which can be compared to the students' translations. Finally, bilingual commercials can be collected relatively easily from magazines by perusing ads of imported or exported goods, especially cars.

The different cultural mentality of American and German consumers is strikingly evident in various Volkswagen commercials. An ad showing a sirloin steak shaped like a VW beetle with the caption: "Can you still get prime quality for $ 1.26 a pound?" would most likely be lost on German buyers, as would a one line profile drawing of a beetle reminding American buyers of the famous Hitchcock face. The latter is cleverly captioned: "How much longer can we hand you this line?". Another VW ad with the single line caption "Lemon" would be impossible to relay. Not only is there no such equivalent for this meaning of "lemon" in German, but a German car manufacturer would probably not dare to draw attention to his product with such whimsical humor, even though the fine printing praises all the advantages of owning this "lemon". Comparing German Volkswagen advertisements against the English versions will prove the point and give rise to fruitful discussions. The following are good examples: "Es gibt noch Dinge, auf die man sich verlassen kann" (there are still things one can rely upon); "Er läuft, ohne laufend Ärger zu machen" (it runs without constantly causing

anger); "Noch nie hatte ein Auto soviel Zeit, perfekt zu werden" (never before had a car so much time to become perfect). The only Volkswagen ad I could find using some humor in German depicts a cartoon of a beetle drawn like a friendly little fat pig, drinking from a nozzle, stating: "Volkswagen machen Sie nicht zum armen Schlucker" (a Volkswagen does not turn you into a poor devil; the German uses an idiom for "poor devil" referring to someone who has nothing to swallow).

The above examples and suggestions are not meant to be comprehensive. Visual conceptualization in language learning has proven to be an important mediator in understanding and memorization. Praising in writing the advantages of teaching with visual aids is almost self defeating. Many different methods of teaching through advertisements will suggest themselves, depending on the language level and background of students. But whatever the individual approach, advertisements are not only more fun than textbooks, they clearly motivate and stimulate students to learn a foreign business language.